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AMERICAN SECURITY STRATEGY IN ASIA:
TIME FOR A CHANGE

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AMERICAN SECURITY STRATEGY IN ASIA: TIME FOR A CHANGE

Background

The day was April 19, 1990. The setting was Room SD-106 in the Dirksen Senate Office Building, the huge hearing room of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Senators Nunn, Levin, Dixon, Wirth, Shelby, Warner, Thurmond, McCain and Gorton were all present to receive testimony and a report from Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Mr. Paul Wolfowitz, on the future of the U.S. military presence in Asia.

The report presented by Mr. Wolfowitz, entitled "A Strategic Framework For the Asian Pacific Rim: Looking Toward the 21st Century", was vintage National War College core curriculum material. The report surveyed the historical strategic environment, analyzed the U.S. regional role and objectives, and offered a strategy for managing U.S. military resources in Asia in the 1990s and beyond.

Despite revolutionary changes in both the global and regional security environment, Mr. Wolfowitz and his DOD associates proposed no fundamental changes in U.S. military strategy in Asia. The longstanding military strategy that incorporates forward-deployed forces and bilateral security arrangements will remain the two pillars of America's security strategy for Asia. This "steady as she goes" approach, to quote Capt. Marty Alford, translates into a substantially unchanged U.S. security strategy for Asia. The only

changes in the extant strategy proposed by Mr. Wolfowitz -- gradual force drawdowns and streamlining of bases -- simply tinkers with the existing framework.

My own assessment is that America's Asian security strategy is badly in need of a fundamental overhaul. In the world of East Asia today where economic issues drive foreign policy, the projection of military power is not an appropriate tool to achieve U.S. national objectives. American military forces have no real enemy to deter (with the exception of North Korea) in Asia. The argument that the military can play a stabilizing role that is also in our national interest is also fallacious.

For the past 40 years the United States has preached the virtues of free trade. But in practice the U.S. security guarantees have facilitated East Asian mercantalism in an effort to keep an anti--Soviet alliance together. This Cold War strategy makes less and less sense as the U.S. economy continues to decline in relative terms and the Soviet threat continues to diminish.

East Asia's superior economic performance -- a performance that is underwritten by U.S. security guarantees -- sustained over a long period will inexorably lead to long-term strategic superiority over the United States. To prevent this from happening, the United States needs to realign its security and economic objectives by scapping its Cold War security strategy. In its place, the United States should move to build a regional security institution that will draw Japan more deeply into a power-sharing role in East Asia.

The transformed Asian security environment

The United States was clearly the predominant power in Asia, both militarily and economically, in the 1950s and 1960s. U.S. national security objectives centered on defending American territory as far forward as possible, containing the Soviet Union, and forming a network of strategic bilateral alliances.

In practice this meant that the United States stood ready to support all non-communist governments, even those that were not of direct importance to U.S. security. The "loss" of any one threatened to undercut American power and influence. Although the long and wrenching Vietnam ordeal epitomized the down-side of this approach, America's cold war Asian strategy was generally successful in producing an environment conducive to economic and political development.

The security environment and mind-set began to change in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the retrenchment in the expansionism of communist states. The Soviet Union got out of Afghanistan, limited support for communist insurgencies, and improved relations with many Asian states. China increasingly focused its intentions on economic reforms and growth. Vietnam's relations with all its neighbors in Southeast Asia improved. Only North Korea appeared to remain a clear-cut threat.

The 1980s produced two more trends that made it increasingly difficult for the United States to identify the enemies which U.S. forces are defending against in Asia. The first is associated with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The second is associated

with the sweeping redistribution of economic power from the United States to Asia.

While it is clear that Soviet military power directed at the Asian theater has not been scaled back anywhere near the same proportion as in Europe, the potential military threat posed by the Soviet Union to Asia has been reduced in several ways. The near collapse of the Soviet economy will discourage foreign adventurism. By reducing tensions, Soviet leaders hope to establish a more benign security environment that allows them to concentrate greater energies and resources on solving domestic economic and political problems. This shift in Soviet regional policies has reduced tensions and is a major factor in possible resolution of a number of chronic regional disputes, such as the Northern territories dispute with Japan and Cambodia. Moreover, with a smaller proportion of its Navy steaming far afield and its capacity to provide economic assistance curtailed, Moscow is less able to project power beyond its own territory.

The redistribution of economic power from the United States to Asia is reflected by the huge and seemingly intractable nature of U.S. trade deficits. During the 1980s, the United States experienced a cumulative trade deficit of \$865 billion. Of this huge amount, \$558 billion or sixty-five percent was accounted for by U.S. trade with eight Asian countries -- Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

These trade deficits with East Asia symbolize a decline of American power and influence. A substantial part of U.S. influence

and power over the past 40 years was derived from the ability of the U.S. economy to absorb vast amounts of imports and to export capital abroad. In the coming years, the United States will be hard pressed to continue doing this. In its place, Japan will be capable of becoming a large importer of goods and together with Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, will become a major source of world investment capital. The combined current account surpluses of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore amounted to \$108.5 billion in 1988, half the global total. Thus, these five countries are already a dominant source of financing for the world economy.

Behind these numbers lies a growing disparity in economic performances between the United States and the more dynamic Asian countries. Asia's superior economic performance sustained as it has been over a long period will inexorably lead to strategic superiority. Faster economic growth over a long period translates into more rapid technological progress, and more rapid technological progress eventually creates a capacity to defeat the military technology of a slower economy. This does not necessarily occur rapidly. It may take decades. But the connection between long-term economic superiority and long-term strategic superiority should not be lost on U.S. national security strategists.

Of course, it was the willingness of the United States to maintain stability in the world that permitted Japan and the other East Asian countries to concentrate single-mindedly on enhancing economic performance. The preferred position of Japan and the

other emerging Asian economic powers is for a continuation of the status quo security arrangements. But as U.S.-Asian economic roles, particularly with Japan, have been reversed, the question has arisen whether the world's largest debtor country can effectively underwrite the security of the world's largest creditor country. The existence of a U.S. security commitment to Japan does not necessarily make Japanese and American interests in the region congruent.

Public opinion polls indicate that the American public perceives Japan as a greater threat to the United States than the Soviet Union. This startling development pinpoints the dilemma of justifying the role of American forces forward-deployed in Asia and bilateral security arrangements geared to protect our most fierce economic competitors. Who is the enemy that U.S. forces are to guard against in Asia?

Hollow Political Objectives

In the absence of a clearly identifiable enemy, Mr. Wolfowitz argues that the principle role of the U.S. military is to serve as the region's "irreplaceable balancing wheel." As the region's balancer, honest broker, and ultimate security guarantor, U.S. forward deployed forces and bilateral security arrangements supposedly serve a stabilizing role.

The notion that the military can preserve stability in Asia is debateable. On the one hand, it is clear that the U.S. military presence in Asia is reassuring to many countries in the region. Virtually all the major countries in Asia support the U.S. security

presence. Given the threat posed by North Korea, the fear of Japanese re-militarization, and historic enmities that divide the countries of Southeast Asia, it is not surprising that the United States presence lessens regional insecurities and contributes to stability. On the other hand, the notion that the military can preserve stability is naive. Stability is not the natural condition of states. The peoples of Asia, as elsewhere, will act on the basis of nationalism and historic patterns. The most that U.S. presence can do is moderate -- not prevent -- conflicts and minimize hostilities.

It is also tempting to argue that the U.S. military serving as an honest broker and stabilizing force in Asia smacks of Kipling's self-serving white man's burden. Can it really be that the United States is the only country in the region lacking the political desire to dominate other countries? But the administration report of U.S. military presence in Asia bears no illusions of altruism. According to the report, "we must play this role because our military presence sets the stage for our economic involvement in this region. With a total two-way transPacific trade exceeding \$300 billion annually, 50 percent more than our transAtlantic trade, it is in our own best interest to help preserve peace and stability."

But is this really so? The cost of defending the Pacific has been estimated at as much as \$42 billion annually-- or approximately the size of the U.S. trade deficit with Japan. The U.S. military presence does not translate into greater economic

influence or preferences. Our warfighters and CINC's would not let that happen. But it does allow the Asian states to prosper within the American dominated free trade international order.

The irony is that East Asia's economic dynamism has little to do with Anglo-American concepts of free trade and limited role for government in guiding economic activity. East Asian states and leaders are not free traders but rather international mercantilists. They believe that governments should take a leading role in mobilizing resources for economic development and they believe that governments should take a leading role in increasing the wealth of the state and the society.

The confucian value systems that pervade East Asian states also has implications for the business structure of East Asian societies. Asian business relationships are often more personal and less contractual than those in the West. Business relationships between suppliers and manufacturers, firms and bankers, and labor and management tend to have a long-term time horizon.

In today's marketplace, where competition requires constant product and industrial upgrading, the East Asian capitalistic model based on government leadership and the tendency of business to take a long-term perspective provides a significant competitive advantage over U.S. firms. Reputed American strengths -- individualism and a limited role for government -- can be viewed as weaknesses in a world marketplace driven by the need to long-term, strategic alliances and investments.

In short, the United States needs a fundamental overhaul of

its political objectives in Asia. Promotion of regional stability may not necessarily support the economic interests of the United States given the current disparity in business practices and government involvement in the marketplace. Bilateral security commitments may not necessarily insure a coincidence of national interests and goals.

The cultural, social, and political priorities of Asian states have led them to organize their economies on the basis of principles quite different from American practice. It is unrealistic for the United States to demand that Asian states become more like us. To get results that favor the United States, the United States must make fundamental changes at home.

In the more fluid Asian environment in the future, security should not remain the overriding U.S. priority. Greater priority must be given to restoring American competitiveness and economic dynamism. The United States cannot have a credible and successful security policy in Asia if it is weak at home.

Towards a New Strategic Mission

Given the vast changes that have occurred in U.S.-Soviet relations and in the Asian security environment, the United States now has the opportunity to realign its strategic and economic priorities. By virtue of its military superpower status, the United States will still have a balancing role to play in Asia. But the U.S. has much more room for choice as to how actively it wishes to play that role and whether it wishes to share that responsibility with Japan and Korea.

In a world of declining resources and no clear-cut threats to America's vital interests, political support in the United States for unilateral and even bilateral military actions will be sorely tested. Both economics and politics will force the United States to link its military actions with multiple partners. The Persian Gulf model of financial and combat costs being shared by regional states and other western partners is bound to become a model for future U.S. military actions. Under these circumstances, there are alternative approaches for America's security policy in Asia.

The first approach is the one proposed by the administration. The principal elements of this approach are forward deployed forces, overseas bases, and bilateral security arrangements. Despite the proposed drawdowns in American forces and active U.S. base facilities, it is hard to see how this approach is little more than a continuation of Cold War strategies. It is an approach that relegates the United States to the status of an armed protector of states that are "beating our pants off" in world trade marketplace. The enhanced economic power of the countries in the region combined with America's own economic problems argues for a new security system to replace the bilateral alliances and base structures now in place.

A second and preferred approach is to move in the direction of some regional "constabulary" force or informal understandings on pooling forces to join with the United States to deal with potential contingencies. Such a force could be used to facilitate international trade in the event of open hostilities, protect the

sealanes to the Middle East, and tackle such problems as terrorism piracy, smuggling and drug trade. Why the United States should guarantee the security of the sealanes in which more than ninety percent of the ships are not American is difficult to understand.

The force would be financed and staffed on a regional basis. The political and economic costs would be shared by all participants, including Japan and the Soviet Union.

Such a scheme would move toward bringing Japan into a more responsible and acceptable military role without igniting the flames of Japanese nationalism or the fears of East Asia. It is a policy initiative open only to the United States, for despite an enormous expansion of economic power in Asia, Japan remains virtually a pariah state in matters of security and politics. The shadow Japan casts over much of East Asia in the decades ahead is in many ways the most uncertain and threatening component of the new international order.

In sum, a continuation of our Cold War strategy in Asia is not a building block for a new international order. It is time for a change in the U.S. approach -- time to build on our past successes, time to elevate our own economic concerns, and time to express confidence in East Asians that they are ready to help us chart a new, richer, and more pacific future for Asia in the 21st Century.

